

‘The education of Greece’: reading Pericles’ Funeral Speech

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For centuries, people have been inspired by Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ funeral speech in honour of the Athenian war dead of 430 B.C. (Thuc. 2.35–46). The power of this speech is enhanced by the way it reverberates through the text. Again and again, echoes in the text bring the reader back to reflect on the values set out here. Indeed, this passage, more than any other, inspired British liberals in the nineteenth century to try to recreate ancient Athens in modern, ‘democratic’ Britain. The speech retains immense power for us even now.

Preparing to glorify Athens

In a sense, we build up to this speech from the very start of the text. In a thinly-veiled slight to his predecessor Herodotus, Thucydides claims (1.1) that *this* war, *his* war, was more important and more worth writing about than any other. This will make the funeral speech the richest, densest and most powerful speech in this the most important of wars.

All the speeches in Thucydides’ work are carefully crafted literary pieces. (He has told us that his will not be accurate reports of what was actually said: 1.23.) As such, they are heightened moments in the text. They gain dramatic tension by the way they are positioned in the work as a whole, and because speakers so often foreshadow and echo each other. When Pericles embarks on his funeral oration in Book ii, the attentive reader remembers the debate about impending war in Book i (68–86), and in particular Archidamos’ warning that Sparta should not fight the wealth and sea-power that Athens’ empire had brought her.

The glory of the city

Anticipating a speech in praise of the Athenian dead, what we actually get is largely a eulogy of Athens. Pericles praises Athens’ forefathers (2.36) for their valour in maintaining Athens’ freedom, and for building her empire. We ourselves, he adds, have strengthened that empire (and thus, by implication, are worthy inheritors of our noble fathers). Pride of place in this speech is given to the Athenian empire, which brings to Athens “all the products of all the earth” (2.38). To die in defence of this empire, he implies, is virtuous and valuable. One cannot read all this without thinking of Sparta – for Spartan fear of this ‘empire’, Thucydides has told us, was the real cause of the war (1.23).

The tacit but crucial contrast is again with Sparta in Pericles’ encomium of Athens’ political institutions and way of life (2.36–42). Unlike Sparta, Athens’ government is run for the many, not the few; poverty is not a bar to political participation; the city is open, tolerant, law-abiding and thus ‘free’ in public and private spheres. The contrast is made explicit when he sets Athenian liberty and ‘openness’ against the notorious upbringing offered by the Spartan ‘education’ system (2.39).

The crux of the conflict – Spartan unrest about Athenian imperialism – continues to haunt the close of the speech, where Pericles reverts to Athenian military daring and the material splendour she acquires as the powerful ruler of an empire (2.43ff.).

When Pericles calls Athens the ‘education of Greece’, then,

he is referring to her empire and its fruits, and the ‘free’ way of life which have enabled them. Athens will be a ‘marvel’ to future ages, Thucydides her able scribe (2.41, 43).

At this heightened pitch of Athenian self-glorification, the text moves immediately to the plague which devastated the city (2.47). It is impossible not to feel that the glory of Athens as depicted in the funeral speech has been undercut. The city’s splendour is being tragically foreshortened – she is sickening from the inside, set on the path to ruin.

This sense of tragedy gathers as the text unfolds. Pericles’ final speech (2.60–64) gains a poignancy through position. Counselling confidence (esp. 2.62), it immediately precedes notice of Pericles’ death. Thucydides also contends at this point that later leaders would prove the ruin of Athens (2.65). The most notorious of those leaders, Kleon, will later be given speeches which cannot fail to recall the contrasting nobility of Pericles (see esp. 3.36–50).

Later, a devastating indication of Athens’ moral decline is dramatised via a speech, the ‘Melian dialogue’ (5.84–116). Athens’ unravelling tragedy is perhaps most intensely represented in the Sicilian expedition (Books 6 and 7). Looking back, the funeral speech was a critical moment, a hinge in the text – a glorious respite before the inexorable downturn epitomised by the plague, a succession of unworthy rulers, and cruel and arrogant decisions made by a people who will wreak their own destruction. Thucydides was a dramatist every bit as much as an historian, and the entire war is represented as a tragic contest or agon between Athens and Sparta.

Reading the speech in the nineteenth century and today

The most famous Greek historian of the nineteenth century, George Grote, and the most famous liberal philosopher, J.S. Mill, were both also radical MPs. Their political stances were critically informed by their wide reading of Greek literature (Mill had famously started learning Greek at the age of three!). The funeral speech above all else inspired them. They believed the oration showed that Athens had managed to combine freedom and military courage and democracy. It encouraged them that a ‘democratic’ Britain could be a successful place. Athens provided them with an example to pitch against the ancient city favoured by their rivals, the Tories – Sparta.

We read the speech rather differently today. With the benefit of inscriptional evidence, and with the experience of empire behind us, we are certainly far more cynical about Athens’ ‘imperialism’ than were nineteenth-century readers. We are also far more trenchant in questioning whether the ideals represented by the funeral speech fitted reality – to what extent was democratic government really ‘run for the many’?

And what about the two ‘heroes’ of the conflict, Sparta and Athens, whose opposing ways of life were enshrined in the funeral speech? The war itself was not, in fact, simply a case of ‘Athens vs. Sparta’. It was a continuation of earlier conflict which revolved around Athens and Corinth. Nor did the conclusion of this war radically redraw the map of the Greek world. The very concept of ‘A Peloponnesian War’, dated 431–404, is in a sense Thucydides’ invention. It creates the impression he

wants us to believe: that this was a coherent episode, with a clear beginning and end, and that it was the most monumental agon ever fought between two cities.

It takes determination to read against the grain in Thucydides and to recognise some of these biases. But it takes a sympathetic, thoughtful reader to see that, at the same time, Thucydides' work remains an exceptional piece – clever, powerful, sometimes beautiful. It encapsulates the perennially important, tragic experience of war – and, by implication, peace. This is a 'war speech' which focuses on empire, freedom and democracy – that is, those peacetime values that Pericles believed were worth going to war over. Implicitly, the challenge for us is to consider our own peacetime values. Not least, we need to ask, right now, what 'freedom' and 'openness' mean in our world.

Or take the idea that "he who takes no interest in public life is not harmless but useless" (2.40). The funeral speech dares us to ask ourselves what kind of world our own 'way of life' creates. By engaging in public life, through our democracy, could we change that world for the better? Thinking about these issues is an important part of what the 'education of Greece' can offer us today.

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